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ABSTRACT

To determine how often children falsely report being sexually abused, this study asked professionals to indicate the percentage of children with whom they had worked who had made false reports. In addition, this study examined the variables that might be associated with the percentage of false allegations reported by professionals. The factors examined were age of the child, profession of the interviewer (law enforcement versus mental health), expectation of the interviewer (whether they believe children generally do not lie about sexual abuse versus interview children neutrally), and sex of the interviewer. Boston-area professionals, including 74 law enforcement professionals and 127 mental health professionals, were interviewed by telephone. The results indicated that women reported a smaller percentage of false allegations than did men, and that all professionals reported fewer false allegations for children under 6 than they did for children age 6-9 or 10-12. An age-of-child X profession-of-interviewer interaction indicated that the law enforcement and mental health professionals were differentially affected by children ages 10-12. Mental health professionals reported a significantly higher percentage of false allegations than did law enforcement professionals. The results of this study indicated that professionals reported a small percentage of cases as having been false. The results also indicated that the percentage of false reports was related to the sex of the interviewer, age of the child, and profession of the interviewer. (BHK)

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How Many Children Lie about Being Sexually Abused?: A Survey of Mental Health and Law Enforcement Professionals

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Abstract

How often do children falsely report being sexually abused? The present study asked professionals to indicate the percentage of children whom they had worked with who had made false reports. A sample of 201 Boston-area professionals were interviewed by telephone. The results indicated that women reported a smaller percentage of false allegations than did men, and that all professionals reported fewer false allegations for children under age 6 than they did for children ages 6-9 or 10-12. An age-of-child X profession-of-interviewer interaction indicated that law enforcement and mental health professionals were differentially affected by children ages 10-12. Mental health professionals reported a significantly higher percentage of false allegations than did law enforcement professionals. These results are discussed in the context of past studies.

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How Many Children Lie about Being Sexually Abused?: A Survey of Mental Health and Law Enforcement Professionals

In the wake of McMartin, people are once again raising the issue of whether children lie about being sexually abused (Conte, 1989). For a few years, professionals took the side of abused children. Statements such as "children never lie about being sexually abused" were common and professionals were encouraged to believe what children told them (e.g., Gelinas, 1988; Herman, 1981). During the heyday of believing children, however, a small number of professionals urged their colleagues to be skeptical about children's statements. This movement has gained strength, and the idea of being skeptical about children's statements is once again in the main stream. For example, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry guidelines for assessing suspected victims (AACAP, 1988) encourage professionals to always keep in mind the possibility of false allegations.

How often do children falsely report being sexually abused? In reality, there are no objective ways of determining whether a child has lied. The decision often comes down to professional judgment (Corwin, Berliner, Goodman, & Goodwin, 1987; Friedman, 1989). While some have attempted to determine the percentage of false reports (e.g., Benedek & Schetky, 1985; Green, 1986), the numbers are at best only estimates. And numbers from other published articles are often based on the judgments of one or two people about how common false allegations of abuse are. To date, no one has asked the professionals who actually work with suspected child victims (in either an investigative or therapeutic capacity) to estimate the incidence of false reports

Yet these are the people who are in the best position to know about how common lying is. In addition, knowing about how common professionals perceive false allegations to be is important because what professionals think about children's truthfulness can influence their perceptions of suspected victims. For example, Everson and Boat (1989) demonstrated that professionals' experience with even one false report can make them less likely to accept children's ambiguous symptoms as indicators of abuse.

The present study attempts to improve on past reports of false allegations by asking a large number of child-abuse professionals to indicate the number of false allegations that they have encountered in their total caseloads. In addition, the present study examines variables that might be associated with the percentage of false allegations that professionals report. The factors examined are age of the child, profession of the interviewer (law enforcement vs. mental health), expectation of the interviewer (whether they believe children generally don't lie about sexual abuse vs interview children neutrally), and sex of the interviewer. These four factors have been shown to influence professionals' perceptions of indicators of sexual abuse (Kendall-Tackett & Watson, in press), and therefore are thought be relevant to the present question.

Method

Subjects

A sample of 201 Boston-area professionals were interviewed by telephone. There were 63 males and 138 females with an mean of 10.12 years experience in their professions, 9.4 years working

with children in general, and 6.1 years working with child victims of sexual abuse. To be eligible to participate in the study, subjects had to work within a designated geographical catchment area, and had to work with child victims of sexual abuse (12 years old or younger) in an either investigative or therapeutic context. The catchment area consisted of all 38 cities and towns within a 20-mile radius of Boston. Subjects were either law enforcement or mental health professionals. (There was no separate category for CPS workers because much of the investigative work in Massachusetts is done by mental health professionals under contract to the Department of Social Services for part of their caseloads. There were only six full-time protective workers in this sample.) Once subjects were identified, the recruitment and data collection procedures were identical for all subjects. Each potential subject was contacted at least six times. Subjects who never returned calls after six tries were counted as refusals, and attempts to contact these persons ceased.

Law Enforcement Professionals. Police departments from all 38 cities and towns within the catchment area were contacted. Fifty officers participated and one officer refused. District attorneys' offices in three counties were also contacted, and 24 district attorney staff members participated. No one refused to participate. There were 10 Assistant District Attorneys, six Victim/Witness Advocates, and eight other staff members from sexual-assault units. In summary, 74 law enforcement professionals participated (42 males and 32 females).

Mental Health Professionals. All mental health

professionals were recruited from either hospital or general mental health settings (including private practice and mental health clinics). All 54 hospitals located within the catchment area were contacted. Only 11 hospitals had personnel who worked with child victims. From these 11 hospitals, 35 professionals were eligible and agreed to participate; there were no refusals. In addition to the professionals contacted at hospitals, a list of potentially eligible non-hospital mental health practitioners was compiled from referrals and professional organizations. Of the potential subjects, two refused to participate, and 92 participated. In summary, 127 mental health professionals participated (21 males and 106 females). There were 35 psychologists, 66 social workers, 4 psychiatrists, 9 therapists, 7 nurse clinical specialists, and 6 others in mental health professions.

In summary, of the 204 who were eligible, 201 participated, leading to a compliance rate of 99%.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was an adaptation of a questionnaire developed by Boat and Everson (1988). It was a standardized telephone interview that asked professionals about their assessments of suspected sexual abuse victims. For the present analysis, subjects were asked to specify the percentage of children in their total caseloads whom they suspected to have lied about being sexually abused (i.e., said that abuse occurred when it did not). Subjects were asked this question for children under age 6, ages 6-9 and 10-12.

Analysis

Data were analyzed using a repeated-measures ANOVA with three between subjects factors (2 X 2 X 2). Age of the child (under age 6, ages 6-9, and 10-12) was the within-subjects factor, and sex of the interviewer, profession of the interviewer (law enforcement vs. mental health), and expectation of the interviewer (believe that children do not lie about sexual abuse vs. interview children neutrally) were the between-subjects factors. Since the between-subjects factors were correlated, the regression method of ANOVA was used. This method assesses each variable for its unique contribution while holding the other effects constant. The percentage of cases where the professional suspected a false allegation was the dependent variable. These were coded 1-8 for each age of the child (1=no cases, 8=>75%; see Table 1).

Results

Most professionals reported that they perceived only a small percentage of the children whom they worked with had lied about being sexually abused. These results are presented on Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

There was a main effect for sex of the interviewer, $F(1,174)=4.69$, $p<.032$, with women reporting a smaller percentage of false reports ($M=1.57$) than did men ($M=1.85$). (The means are reflective of the code assigned; see Table 1). There were no significant main effects for expectation of the interviewer and

profession of the interviewer.

The significant main effect for age of the child, $F(2,348)=8.80$, $p<.0001$, indicated that professionals reported significantly fewer children under age 6 ($M=1.5$) as having lied than children ages 10-12 ($M=1.78$, $t=3.46$, $p<.01$). The differences between children under age 6 and 6-9 ($t=1.81$), and children ages 6-9 and 10-12 ($t=1.86$) were not significant.

There was also an age-of-child X profession-of-interviewer interaction, $F(2,348)=5.1$, $p<.007$ (see Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 about here

This interaction indicated that mental health and law enforcement professionals reported approximately equal numbers of false allegations for children under age 6 ($M=1.57$;1.58 for mental health and law enforcement respectively). For children ages 6-9, mental health professionals ($M=1.62$) reported fewer false allegations than did law enforcement professionals ($M=1.78$, $t=1.38$), although the difference was not significant. For children ages 10-12, mental health professionals ($M=2.27$) reported significantly more false allegations than did law enforcement professionals ($M=2.02$, $t= 2.14$, $p<.05$).

Discussion

The results of the present study indicate that professionals reported a surprisingly small percentage of cases as having been false. The results also indicated that the percentage of false reports was related to the sex of the interviewer, age of the child, and profession of the interviewer.

Women in the present sample reported a smaller percentage of false allegations than did men. This finding is consistent with the results of past studies, and cannot be attributed to profession effects since each factor was evaluated separately. Jackson and Nuttal (1990) found that female clinicians were more likely to be convinced by ambiguous vignettes than were male clinicians when describing sexual abuse. Similarly, Kendall-Tackett and Watson (in press) found that women were more convinced than were men by ambiguous behavioral indicators of sexual abuse. Although this effect has appeared in past studies, it is difficult to explain and should be explored more fully in future studies.

The age main effect indicated that professionals perceived fewer false reports among the younger children than there were among the 6-9 year olds and 10-12 year olds. This finding runs counter to the notion that younger children are more likely to make false allegations either because of Oedipal fantasies (Yates, 1987) or because they are hapless pawns in their parents' custody disputes (AACAP,1988). Professionals may be taking into account children's naivete on sexual matters and therefore find the younger children to be most convincing. Indeed, Kendall-Tackett and Watson (in press) found that professionals were more convinced that abuse had occurred when children under age 6 demonstrated an adult-level knowledge of sexuality, than when children ages 6-9 or 10-12 demonstrated this same knowledge.

The age X profession interaction indicated that mental health and law enforcement professionals were differentially

affected by 10-12 year olds. Mental health professionals reported a significantly higher percentage of false allegations in the 10-12 year old age group than did law enforcement professionals. The relatively higher percentage reported by mental health professionals is consistent with one past clinical study that indicated that older children were more likely to "opportunistically" lie about sexual abuse than were the younger children (Goodwin, 1982). These findings are also consistent with the theoretical orientation that states that fantasized incest is more common in preadolescent girls (Green, 1986). It is interesting too that law enforcement professionals were more convinced by the 10-12 year olds. Law enforcement professionals in the present sample tended to view the older children as better witnesses. In fact, many specifically said that the 10-12 year olds were the most credible of the three age groups asked about in this study.

Overall, the results indicate that professionals perceive that children rarely make false allegations of abuse. A note of caution is appropriate in interpreting these findings, however. These data do not prove that very few children lie about sexual abuse. They do, however, describe the perceptions of people who work with suspected child victims. These people are in the best position to know about how often children lie about sexual abuse. At the very least, we should listen to them as closely as we do to those who claim that false allegations are commonplace.

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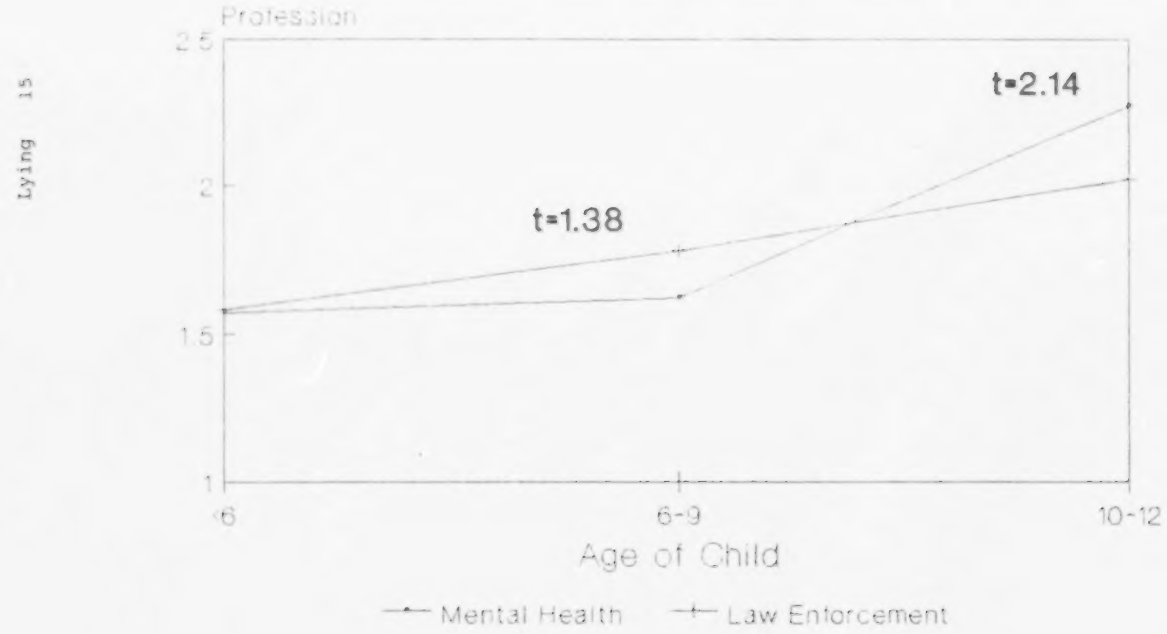
Table 1

Percentage of Children Whom Professionals Suspected had lied about being sexually abused.

Age of the Child	Percentage of Cases						
	None	<5	5-10	11-25	26-50	51-75	>75
under age 6	118	59	12	3	0	0	
ages 6-9	104	71	16	6	0	0	0
ages 10-12	84	82	18	7	2	0	0

Figure Caption

Figure 1. Percentage of children who lied about being sexually abused. A profession of interviewer by age of child interaction.



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